

Realizing the Dream Anew—Three Branches Together
A Common Ministry Proposal Realizing Our Common Foundational
Mission in North America Today

by Robert K. Moriarty, SM

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Today Marianist life is at a crossroads. To me, it seems the spark of vitality among us needs rekindling.¹

—David Fleming, SM

David Fleming begins the final chapter of *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today* with the abovementioned words. He concludes the chapter by calling for “a common missionary vision”² addressed to the whole Marianist Family. In a 2017 presentation to MLC-NA, Raymond Fitz, SM, echoes Fleming's sentiment by calling for a “new missionary narrative.” Their shared focus on the “new” and the “missionary” crystalizes for me in this question: Going forward, what are we Marianists to be about in this time and place?

It is commonplace to speak of our living in a time of great change and even turmoil. It is a fraught time in many ways for the Marianist Family, the Church, the United States and North America, and the entire world. While we find ourselves at a crucial point in Marianist life, the development of *a new common missionary vision* remains a task that is yet to be fully engaged. Why might this be?

It is, I believe, because the Marianist Family has, in the language of this Assembly, yet to fully *encounter, embrace, and engage* our common foundational Marianist mission. It is as if we are distracted by at least two inhibiting factors: first, by the dedication that keeps us so busy about many

¹ David Fleming, *A New Fulcrum: Marianist Horizons Today* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2014), 177.

² Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 194.

good things that we are often focused more on *ministry* than on *mission*; and second, as odd as it may sound, by the conventional parlance that sums up “the Marianist thing” under the rubric of the “Marianist charism.”

Preoccupation with ministry over mission is an occupational hazard for us all, but it stems, with implications for the whole Marianist Family, for the male professed especially, from “a work,” namely “the school,” having dominated Marianist consciousness for 200 years.

I realize it is quite unconventional to challenge the use of the term *Marianist charism*, but I do not mean to be iconoclastic about it. Let me be clear; I do not object to the term, much less to what I believe is its essential meaning. *Marianist charism* is a perfectly good term. It is fundamental to the Marianist thing, but it is the way we use the term that concerns me—specifically, its general use as a comprehensive category summing up the Marianist thing.

Our prevailing use of the term facilitates our speaking so diffusely about the Marianist thing. It is introduced into our conversation at the drop of a hat. We regularly hear well-meaning and generic catch-all references to the Marianist charism, but it is frequently without any additional elaboration. This hearer/reader is often left with no clear sense of what the user of the term actually intends or understands. On occasion, it seems like related themes, such as “hospitality,” are being summarily referred to as the Marianist charism. While a number of significant themes do indeed flow from the charism, we need, I believe, to speak with a more concentrated focus on its core meaning.

Additionally, and of particular significance at a deeper level, the Marianist charism is often invoked with no reference to the Marianist mission. Subsumed under the rubric Marianist charism, Marianist mission, even if it be named a “pillar,” effectively comes off as a subset or corollary of the charism. Simply summing up the Marianist thing with the term Marianist charism runs the risk of becoming an overwrought preoccupation with spirituality. Marianist spirituality is essential to the Marianist thing, but it does not exist in a vacuum. Marianist spirituality, when it is untethered from the mission, runs the risk of devolving simply into piety, however enlightened. Marianist spirituality finds its proper meaning distinct from but essentially related to and at the service of the Marianist mission. Marianist spirituality is energy for the Marianist mission.

In Marianist circles these days, the plethora of expressions like “cultivating the Marianist charism,” “implanting the Marianist charism,” and “replicating the Marianist charism” lends itself to the impression that “handing on the *Marianist charism*” is the *Marianist mission*. The terms run together when spoken of in this manner. However, the terms are not one and the same. In short, summing up the Marianist thing under the rubric of the Marianist charism fails to do justice to both terms, as well as to the relationship between them. They need to be more adequately defined and distinguished, and the relationship between them needs more appropriate clarification.

Part One

Marianist Mission/Marianist Charism Clarifying Terms and Relations

As I understand it, the Marianist mission has to do, first of all, with *what* Marianists are to be about. The Marianist charism has to do with the *spirit* that animates what we are to be about.

In speaking of the Marianist mission, I mean to speak of the foundational mission as envisioned by Father Chaminade. With a view to the rekindling of faith and the rebuilding of the Church and society in the wake of the French Revolution, the centerpiece of Chaminade’s missionary vision and plan was the *animation and promotion of Sodality communities*. Some people speak of the Marianist mission simply as the “multiplication of Christians.” But in tune with Marianist scholar Eduardo Benlloch, SM, I suggest that the foundational mission is more properly expressed as “the multiplication of communities of faith in mission for the sake of the multiplication of Christians.” Benlloch, when referring to the Sodality, said, “Sometimes we say the purpose was to multiply Christians, but we have to understand well the method. In the Sodality of Father Chaminade, Christians were multiplied by multiplying sodalists.”³

While Chaminade eventually moved forward with openness to a variety of works, particularly “the school,” the Sodality was not simply “a work.” Various “works” may be accomplished in concert with the promotion and

³ Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Origins of the Marianist Family: Notes on Marianist History* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2010), 95.

development of the Sodality, but the Sodality held a rank beyond “works.” The Sodality was the enduring heart of his missionary vision, plan, and apostolic method. This is what stands as the foundational Marianist mission.

By speaking of the Marianist charism, I mean to speak of the spirit and the animating heart that informs the Marianist mission. While *charism* is not a word Chaminade used, he made clear what is at stake for him in this regard. “The spirit of the Institute is the spirit of Mary” (the spirit of Mary being the spirit of faith). This animating spirit grounds our alliance with the Woman of Faith in her mission as the Mother of the Lord and the Mother of the Church—forming us ever more fully into the body of Christ given for the sake of the world. Our Marianist charism is meant to be shared, certainly; it is meant to shine in the promotion and realization of the mission. It is meant not only to give shape and color to our missionary style but also to empower our mission. The language of Noël Le Mire, SM, resonates with this broad perspective when he speaks of Chaminade’s return to Bordeaux from exile. “Chaminade returned from Saragossa with a general plan, both missionary and Marian.”⁴

He is pointing to principles (“missionary” and “Marian”). It is instructive that he names them in that sequence because they stand on par, and they should be spoken of as such. One is not a subset of the other. They are, however, like two sides of a coin. Put this way, Marianist mission *leads*, and Marianist charism *backs* Marianist mission. Put dynamically, Marianist mission and Marianist charism stand together in a polar relationship, as it were. Marianist charism serves to animate and energize the Marianist mission. The Marianist mission embodies the charism. It gives it flesh. To speak of one calls for addressing the other. For some people, speaking about the Marianist thing starts with speaking of the Marianist charism; for this Marianist, speaking of the Marianist thing begins with speaking about the Marianist mission.

Our language about the Marianist mission needs to come more to the fore. Most importantly, if we are to arrive at “a new *missionary* narrative” embodying the heart of Father Chaminade and responsive to the signs of the times, the foundational vision of the Missionary Apostolic needs to be more

⁴ Noël Le Mire, SM, Address to the International Mariological Congress. Saragossa, Spain, Oct. 10, 1979. French text located in Vincent Gizard, SM, *Noël Le Mire, prêtre marianiste*, “Réflexions et Messages: Le Vénérable Guillaume-Joseph Chaminade et Notre-Dame del Pilar de Saragosse,” 82-104.

fundamentally retrieved, embraced, and pursued. It is not just a matter of developing a “new” missionary narrative, however. Fleming puts his finger on the heart of the matter when he calls for a “*common*” missionary vision, which is “*common*” because the foundational Marianist mission is our *common* mission.

If the development of an adequate, common missionary vision for our time and place begins by being grounded on our common foundational mission, actualizing such a vision invites a common ministry proposal on its behalf. This presentation then offers such a proposal. It envisions a Marianist mission-focused/Marianist charism-animated investment of the whole Marianist Family of North America in a closely collaborative effort to promote the development of small church communities as integral to the long-range renewal of the Church in North America at its most local level: the parish. Thus, while I share these reflections today with the Marianist Lay Communities of North America, simultaneously, I necessarily address them to the whole Marianist Family.

For 200 years, unfortunately, the Society of Mary has functioned as if it owned the whole Marianist thing all by itself (a disposition, I acknowledge, that I absorbed and took for granted myself as a young religious). Happily, however, the Society has also served as a repository of documents that have enabled us to recover key insights into our tradition in time. Gradually, we have come to the realization that no branch of the Marianist Family owns the whole mission by itself. No branch implements the mission on its own. The very nature of the Marianist mission and its authentic pursuit intrinsically involves the branches of the Family bound up with one another in close collaboration.

While these reflections are headed to a concrete proposal that seeks to engage the whole Marianist Family in support of a small church community vision for the North American Catholic parish today, they are focused in the first place and throughout on the full embrace and collaborative pursuit of our common foundational mission. We are not Franciscans or Jesuits. We are not a generic religious family. We are the Marianist Family. We have a proper identity and reason for being, and we review and consider our foundational Marianist missionary warrant as the ground for a common ministry proposal.

Part Two

The Marianist Family’s Common Foundational Mission

Let us first review the emergence and development of our foundational mission, followed by its subsequent overshadowing and eventual loss, and then its gradual, tentative, and as-yet-incomplete recovery and engagement.

1. The Emergence and Development of Our Foundational Mission

The foundational Marianist mission begins with the Missionary Apostolic himself [Father William Joseph Chaminade], is assigned by him to the Sodality, manifests in the State, and then extends to the two religious congregations.

a. The Missionary Apostolic’s Foundational Mission

After three years of reflection, prayer, and conversation with fellow French priests in exile, Father Chaminade returned to Bordeaux in November of 1800. He returned with a clear missionary vision of what he felt called to do to rekindle the faith and rebuild a devastated Church. He set to work immediately, gathering young men who were eager to deepen their faith that had been so under assault during these revolutionary years. Only three months after his return, the first 11 members of the Bordeaux Sodality made their public commitment to re-imbue Christian faith and life in a ravaged Church and society.⁵

If the word *charism* was not part of Chaminade’s vocabulary, *mission* most certainly was. Indeed, *mission* was a gripping term for him. Its power leaps out at us from the deeply significant ecclesiastical title he sought for himself: *Missionary Apostolic*. This title was originally designed in the seventeenth century to facilitate pastoral work in “emergency situations,”⁶ and it defined Chaminade’s sense of call for the rest of his life. Linking this title from the beginning to the establishment of the Sodality, he continued throughout his life to speak of the Sodality as the embodiment of its significance.

⁵ David Fleming, SM, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic.’” Unpublished Paper; courtesy of David Fleming, 11.

⁶ Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 19. While I do not always reference it, I acknowledge here that I draw liberally from *A New Fulcrum*.

In 1814, for instance, more than a dozen years after its reception, he recalls this relationship in a letter to Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon (also known as Marie of the Conception):

I am going to tell you my whole secret. . . . Fourteen years ago I returned to France as Missionary Apostolic throughout our unhappy land. . . . There seemed to me no better way of exercising these functions than by establishing a Sodality like the one now existing. Each sodalist, of whatever sex, age, or condition of life, is required to become an active member of the mission.⁷

Many years later, when he was almost 80, he still underlined the connection of the Sodality to the title. In his 1838 letter to Pope Gregory XVI seeking approbation of the two congregations, he spoke first of his reception of the title and the work of the Sodality that was animated by it. He spoke of heaven having inspired him to seek the title of Missionary Apostolic. He stated, “so as to enliven and rekindle on all sides the divine torch of faith by showing everywhere . . . imposing masses of Catholic Christians . . . who belonging to special associations, would practice our holy religion . . . in all the purity of its dogmas and its morality.”⁸

Then, after noting the date of his reception of the title, March 28, 1801, he continued: “From then on, Most Holy Father, fervent sodalities for men and for women were formed in several cities of France. Religion had the happiness of counting a rather large number of adherents in a relatively short time, and much good was accomplished.”⁹

Joseph Verrier, SM, a premier French Marianist researcher, echoed Chaminade’s connection between the establishment of the Sodality and the title when he remarked that Chaminade chose to exercise his pastoral ministry through a Marian Sodality as “the pivot of the religious restoration of his homeland” and the “means par excellence” of honoring the title of missionary

⁷ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 52 to Adèle, Oct. 8, 1814; vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 132.

⁸ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 1076 to Pope Gregory XVI, Sept. 16, 1838; vol. 4, p. 293.

⁹ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 1076, p. 293.

apostolic. The promotion and animation of the Sodality stood as the foundational mission of the Missionary Apostolic.¹⁰

b. Foundational Mission of the Sodality

Sodality, sodality, sodality! What is the fuss all about? Verrier quotes Chaminade some years after the Sodality's initial establishment. "It is a society of fervent Christians . . . who, in order to imitate the Christians of the early Church, try, through frequent meetings, to attain unity of heart and soul, to form one family, not only as sons of God, as brothers of Jesus Christ and members of his mystical Body, but also as children of Mary."¹¹

Chaminade speaks here from 30,000 feet, as it were. It is a lofty vision that animated him, but the beginnings were humble.

Chaminade returned to Bordeaux to a milieu that was not only of general religious indifference but also of active hostility promoted by the anti-religious rationalism of the intellectuals. Prior to the Revolution, however, the masses were already deeply alienated from the Church. Amid widespread poverty, the masses experienced Church leadership, allied with the monarchy, as a privileged elite in control of much of the country's property and economic resources.

To rekindle Christianity, Chaminade saw the need to create a new milieu. He understood that one could not be a Christian in isolation in the prevailing climate. Encountering a vital Christian might be impressive, but it might well leave one feeling that one could not measure up. Encountering a group of such Christians could be another matter. Christians need community. There is strength in numbers. For Chaminade, it was a matter of conversion by contagion and by providing continuing community support, not simply by preaching at people.

The Sodality was wide open to all men and women of goodwill. As for things religious, it was just the essentials. Concerned with the whole person and related to daily life, the Sodality offered support for employment, courses (such

¹⁰ Joseph Verrier, SM, "Why Fr. Chaminade Founded Sodalities," *The Verrier Collection* (Part II). (MRC, June 1974).

¹¹ Verrier, "Why Fr. Chaminade Founded Sodalities," 10.

as writing), and a library. There was help for sodalists who were ill. There were excursions, games, and entertainment.

Chaminade was not simply about gathering groups of pious people. The Sodality was not about forming some apostles to send out to the masses. It was, rather, a matter of drawing the masses in and creating a Christianizing milieu for the greatest possible number. His vision of “salvation through Christian community” was to be embodied in the Sodality as “a Center for edification.”¹²

By no means merely self-referential ecclesial communities, Chaminade contrasted his Sodality to what he considered “old-time Sodalities” that, he suggested, were simply about sustaining already pious Christians. The Church of the day, he understood, needed *active missionaries*. This, he said, “is the spirit which the new Sodalities inculcate. Each director is a permanent missionary, and each Sodality is a perpetual mission.”¹³ From the beginning, the Sodality was engaged in mission focused on active recruitment to the Sodality.

Concerned not only with their formation in faith but also with the world around them, these sodalists were at work from the start in ministries, such as visiting hospitals and prisons, teaching literacy, running a lending library, founding Christian schools, and caring for chimney sweeps (street children of the era).¹⁴ While sodalists were also much involved in the works of social and spiritual concern, the Sodality operated in effect with a clear distinction between ministry and mission. Verrier puts it this way: “To multiply Christians, the sodality of Bordeaux wishes to multiply sodalists, and the sole apostolate recommended to all is the growth and preservation of the Sodality.”¹⁵

Throughout that first decade, the Sodality continued to expand rapidly. While its ministries flourished, its mission was primary. As a result, by 1810, there were about a thousand sodalists from all over Bordeaux.

In sum, the growth and preservation of the Sodality itself was the foundational mission of the Sodality.

¹² Verrier, “Why Fr. Chaminade Founded Sodalities,” 10.

¹³ Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 26.

¹⁴ Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 43.

¹⁵ Verrier, “The Sodality of the Madeleine,” *The Verrier Collection* (Part II), 70-71.

c. Foundational Mission of the State

When Napoleon suppressed sodalities throughout France in 1809, the Sunday evening gatherings of the Madeleine Sodality were soon forbidden. This did not deter Chaminade from his mission; it actually served to deepen his investment in it. Chaminade once again went underground.

He gathered Sodality leaders in small informal groups.¹⁶ Some of these sodalists took short-term vows, sometimes adding a promise or vow of “stability” in the service of mission within the Madeleine Sodality.”

The State was different in its approach because it was secret. State members gathered for prayer in private as they were able, and some members lived together. Verrier noted, “It would be only to the advantage toward the goal to be attained, to give the impulse to the sodality, to be in some manner the soul of it.”¹⁷ Thus, in Verrier’s terms, “the preservation, the augmentation, and the perfecting of the Sodality” was the State’s foundational mission.

d. Foundational Mission of the Daughters of Mary

With the departure of Napoleon from the scene and the reestablishment of a Catholic monarchy, a new religious openness emerged. Active collaboration with Adèle by this time included imagining the establishment of two new religious orders, one for women and one for men.

Writing to Adèle about women who expressed a desire for religious life, Chaminade tied the prospective new congregation to the promotion of the Sodality. He wrote that “care must be taken that it does not essentially change the work of the Sodality, but that it rather helps it along.”¹⁸

Then, Chaminade presents Adèle an outline for the future foundation and addresses what they are to be about.¹⁹ Having explicitly dismissed the ministries of teaching, caring for the sick, or conducting a boarding establishment, he poses the question, “what are we to do, then?”²⁰ Instructing young women in religion and training them in the practice of virtue were the

¹⁶ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 15.

¹⁷ Joseph Verrier, SM, “The Devotion to Our Lady in the Sodality of Fr. Chaminade,” *The Verrier Collection* (Part II) (Marianist Resources Commission, June 1974), 59-60.

¹⁸ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 52 to Adèle, p. 132.

¹⁹ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 57 to Adèle, p. 142.

²⁰ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 57 to Adèle, p. 141.

ministries he proposed to her. And for what purpose? Chaminade answered, “to make them true sodalists.”²¹ He concluded by saying, “You can see, my dear Child, from this brief sketch that the Sodality will suffer no harm from your religious profession. Quite the contrary!”²²

Three years after the foundation of the Daughters—having already been drawn into teaching by Bishop Jacoupy—Adèle wrote to Emilie de Rodat, the founder of another women’s congregation, about the foundational mission of the Daughters. “Our main objective is the foundation and development of Sodalities. You would find it hard to believe all the good the Sodalities accomplish.”²³

In Adèle’s own words, we hear the foundational mission of the Daughters of Mary: “the foundation and development of Sodalities.”

e. Foundational Mission of the Society of Mary

In the year following the establishment of the Daughters of Mary, Jean Lalanne, then age 22 and deeply involved in the Sodality since the age of 12, approached Chaminade during Lent and told him that he felt called to a religious vocation and would like to work with Chaminade and extend his mission.²⁴

Together, Chaminade and Lalanne went about recruiting other potential candidates. That October, seven men pledged to move into the new religious community. By December, these first members made their initial, short-term religious vows in the Sodality’s chapel, the Madeleine. Eight months later, in September of 1818, the members professed the traditional religious vows, to which they added the vow of stability, understood as a permanent commitment to the new community dedicated to Mary and to its mission.²⁵ Addressing the nature of the congregation’s foundation, Fleming remarked that “The primary mission the new community . . . had in mind was the maintenance of the Sodality itself. . . . They continued to participate as active members of the Madeleine Sodality.”²⁶

²¹ Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 57 to Adèle, p. 141.

²² Benlloch, *Origins*, 157.

²³ Adèle, *Letters*, no. 334 to Emilie de Rodat, June 21, 1819; vol. 2, p. 36.

²⁴ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 18.

²⁵ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 19.

²⁶ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 19.

Eduardo Benlloch spoke similarly of the founding motivation. “The idea of these men was to dedicate themselves to the same kind of life and works as the director of the Sodality. This was the point of departure in the conception of the Society of Mary—to live and to do what he was doing.”²⁷

It is then that the promotion and animation of the Sodality stands as the foundational mission of the Society of Mary.

f. Marianist Family’s Common Foundational Mission

Thus, originated with the Missionary Apostolic, assigned by him to the Sodality, manifested in the State, and extended to the two religious congregations, the Marianist Family—it may be said—has a single, common foundational mission. To put it into Chaminadean language, it is the promotion and animation of the Sodality, which we speak of today as the multiplication of communities of faith in mission, more concisely, Marianist Lay Communities.

2. Foundational Mission: Overshadowing and Eventual Loss

From the beginning of the Society of Mary, the very practical circumstances of needing to earn the community’s livelihood set in motion a dynamic that overshadowed the foundational mission.²⁸

Three of the initial members (Lalanne, Perrière, and Collineau: all experienced teachers) already worked at the school run by Jean Baptiste Estebenet, who was himself a sodalist. While collaborating with Estebenet, they established the first Marianist school on an adjoining property. Thus, the school trajectory was launched, and it would dominate the Marianist consciousness for two centuries.

Perrière, who had already been a principal, would eventually leave the Society and become a Jesuit. Lalanne, for all his early investment in the Sodality, would, over time, become so enamored with “the school,” especially secondary education, that he was eventually all but consumed by it. He became an exceptional educator, no doubt. However, his extravagance and failures in

²⁷ Eduardo Benlloch, SM, *Chaminade’s Message Today* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2001), 82.

²⁸ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 20.

financial administration became a major thorn in Father Chaminade's side.²⁹ Collineau became the prefect of the Sodality in the year following the Society's foundation. He and Lalanne were soon ordained. However, in 1830, Collineau also withdrew from Society. He left because he did not want to teach or be a chaplain in a school. He wanted to be preaching missions and directing sodalities.

In time and with Chaminade's encouragement, the emerging call for universal primary education in France—and the evangelizing opportunity it offered in a secularistic age—compounded the Society's investment in schools.

In 1823, six years after the foundation of the Society, an invitation from the Diocese of St. Remy to work with all the teachers in that diocese led Chaminade to a whole new area of investment: teacher-training schools (normal schools).

Chaminade was taken by the intuition that the development of normal schools throughout France could give the Church an enormous evangelizing influence on many French children and their families. He developed plans in this regard until the Revolution of 1830 undermined this possibility.³⁰

Before long, however, a large number of young religious were teachers responding to the growing desire for universal primary education.³¹ Within the first decade of both Marianist Sisters and Brothers, notes Fleming, teaching in primary schools became their key task everywhere.³² With more and more young men coming to the Society, desirous of being teachers and having no prior experience of the Sodality, the congregation's on-the-ground commitment to the Sodality began to wobble and eventually tumbled.

With the coming of new revolutionary upheaval in July of 1830, the Bordeaux communities were attacked by the Masons. Faced with their rallying cry that these groups were being "Chaminaded," notes Fleming, the Founder withdrew from the city to take pressure off his followers.

²⁹ Eventually, Lalanne had to withdraw from the Society for a time to resolve a considerable debt he was responsible for incurring.

³⁰ Fleming, "Chaminade 'Missionary Apostolic,'" 21.

³¹ Fleming, "Chaminade 'Missionary Apostolic,'" 23.

³² Fleming, "Chaminade 'Missionary Apostolic,'" 28.

With the guidance of the Sodality during the 1830s falling to the less-than-effective Father Georges Caillet, “recruitment slowed, and fervent enthusiasm subsided.”³³ Then, under the guidance of Father Jules Perrodin, in the 1840s, the situation was no better. The Sodality continued to weaken.³⁴

Caillet and Perrodin both came to the Society in its early years and were already ordained. They were already taken by the Marianist school, and neither man had any prior experience of the Madeleine Sodality. Both Caillet and Perrodin were significant early collaborators with Chaminade, but the Society’s Founder would, in time, suffer deeply at the hands of each man.³⁵

Antonio Gascón, SM, a Marianist historian, has suggested that the eventual extinction of the Sodality was due to a failure to “modernize its methods.” While this assessment is not completely irrelevant, Gascón’s language serves, in effect, if not in intent, to deflect. It suggests that responsibility for the loss of the Sodality rested simply with the general failure of the Sodality itself “as an institution.” The weakening and eventual loss of the Sodality, I suggest, might otherwise be described as stemming more explicitly from unimaginative and inept professed Marianist leadership failing to rise to the task assigned to the Society as “a man who does not die.”

Had the Missionary Apostolic not made the prudential decision to leave the city to protect his followers, it is not difficult to imagine, I suggest, that he might otherwise once again have gone underground to preserve and advance his foundational mission.

Noting that the Society of Mary morphed more and more into a teaching congregation as the nineteenth century moved on, Fleming remarks that young adult lay communities like the Madeleine Sodality, Chaminade’s founding inspiration, weakened and faded away. Sodalities, where they existed,

³³ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 33.

³⁴ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 34.

³⁵ The Chaminade-Caillet relationship will be considered further in what follows. Let it be noted that Perrodin, in the 1860s, became the leading voice who called for the division of the Society of Mary into two separate congregations, one for priests and the other for brothers. This turn of events leads one to the legitimate surmise that this man had something less than a complete understanding or appreciation of Chaminade’s founding vision.

he remarked, came to be understood simply as religious organizations for young students in Catholic schools.³⁶

Analyzing the aftermath of the Revolution of 1830, Marianist historian Lawrence Cada, SM, put it this way. “For all intents and purposes, Marianist lay communities had passed out of existence. . . . Their place was taken by Marian confraternities, where a remnant of the first lay Marianists continued their experience of Marianist spirituality as they grew older.”³⁷ In other words, a focus on spirituality trumped the pursuit of the foundational mission.

Speaking of the post-1830 period, Verrier bluntly summarized it as “the Chaminade spirit was lost.”³⁸

When Chaminade died on January 22, 1850, there was “simultaneously an explosive pattern of growth and an unmistakable loss of broad vision, a narrowing of focus.”³⁹

Under Caillet’s leadership as Superior General, the early 1850s saw the Society of Mary begin to staff almost 30 new schools. This growth continued steadily for almost two decades.⁴⁰

According to Fleming, by the 1870s, “Across France, Marianist religious were by then known principally for their educational work, much more than for any role in any form of lay ministry.”⁴¹

Later, as Superior General, Father Simler’s research began restoring the image of Father Chaminade, which was damaged by the controversies with Caillet during the Founder’s last years. However, Simler’s appreciation for the role and import of the Sodality remained a pale reflection of the vision of the Founder.

Simler, then Head of Instruction for the Society, spoke appreciatively in his report to the General Chapter of 1873 of the “immense good” the Sodality accomplished among students and of the good work of the priests with

³⁶ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 32-33.

³⁷ Lawrence J. Cada, SM, *A Short History of Marianist Spirituality*, part of the series *Modern Theology & Marianist Spirituality* (Madrid: General Administration of the Society of Mary, 2000), 77.

³⁸ Verrier, “Why Fr. Chaminade Founded Sodalities,” *The Verrier Collection* (Part II), 22.

³⁹ Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 107.

⁴⁰ Fleming, *A New Fulcrum*, 108-09.

⁴¹ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 34.

adults at the Madeleine. However, Simler was essentially focused on schools. Continuing to speak of the Sodality, Simler explained to the Chapter that “the lack of personnel has not allowed us to put this beautiful theory into practice” because “the needs of the houses of education . . . must be sustained.” The best he said about the Sodality at this point was that the Sodality was simply an “interesting objective of the Society.”⁴²

Can any Marianist today imagine those words of faint praise ever coming from the mouth of the Missionary Apostolic and Founder?

When the first Marianists came to the United States in 1849, naturally they brought with them their experience in primary education, but not Chaminade’s Sodality.

To his credit, it was Simler himself who introduced the high school Sodality to Nazareth in Dayton while on visitation as Head of Instruction. Nevertheless, primary education became the pattern of Marianist ministry in this country for about a hundred years.⁴³

As the twentieth century moved on, Marianist presence in rural areas declined. Primary education was slowly de-emphasized in favor of secondary schools, and Marianists became largely identified as specialists in Catholic secondary education.

This recollection of the overshadowing and extinction of Chaminade’s Sodality must be balanced by also observing that, from the beginning of the Society until Chaminade’s death, the centrality of the Sodality in the vision of the Missionary Apostolic and Founder stood firm.

For instance, while he gathered for weekly meetings with the members of the first community, Chaminade declined their invitation to live with them because of the demands of the work with the Madeleine Sodality.

Then, for all his investment in schools as time moved on, even during that seven-year “period of the normal schools” (1823-1830), his commitment to the importance of the Sodality did not waver. In 1824, seven years after the

⁴² Antonio Gascón, SM, *The General History of the Society of Mary*, vol. 1 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2021), 495.

⁴³ Fleming, “Chaminade as ‘Missionary Apostolic,’” 41.

foundation of the Society and while defending the Sodality from the criticisms of local pastors, Chaminade still affirmed the central import of the Sodality to his vision. Speaking of what was needed in this continued time of pastoral emergency, the Sodality was the fulcrum of which he spoke.

He concluded this defense of the Sodality by referring to the Society as “a man who does not die.” This was no pious nosegay. It was not some general affirmation of the Society. There is content here. There is specific reference here. In so speaking, Chaminade explicitly assigned to the Society the responsibility of serving as the enduring guarantor of the Sodality.

Experience has helped us understand . . . that for a director of a sodality, there is needed even more than we have indicated; there has to be a man who does not die—that is to say, a society of men who have given themselves to God for this work, who will carry it on at a mature age after having been formed to it under holy obedience and will transmit to one another the same spirit and the same means.

It is these views that have given birth to the Institute of Mary.⁴⁴

In so speaking, Chaminade reaffirmed the foundational mission of the Society. For all of Chaminade’s investment in primary education, it was never his intention that the school co-opt the Sodality or that teaching in schools proceed on a separate track, simply alongside the promotion and development of the Sodality. Involvement in schools was meant to serve as a gateway to the Sodality.

Chaminade’s language is explicit:

Let us say that children will be received into our schools; from our schools, they will pass on into the Sodalities for Young Men and Young Women, then into the Sodalities for men and women of mature

⁴⁴ *The Chaminade Legacy*, Doc. No. 53, Vol. 1 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2006), 694.

age. The Society then ought to tend continually towards this double end: to open schools and to form Sodalities.⁴⁵

When Chaminade returned to Bordeaux in 1836 at the age of 75, he was deeply involved in matters pertaining to the development of the still-young Society and in seeking Rome's approbation of the two congregations. During this time, he prepared his letter to Pope Gregory, which began with his appeal to the title of Missionary Apostolic and foundational work of the Sodality.

On September 5, 1839, Chaminade delivered the now-approved Constitutions to the Society. Addressing specifically the responsibility of the priests of the Society, article 352 reads:

Since primitively the Sodality of young men gave birth to the Society and that of young women to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, they everywhere take the greatest interest in their formation and in their support. That is most specially the work of their heart.

Well into his senior years in the 1840s, internal forces made it difficult for Chaminade to keep the Society focused on its foundational vision and mission. If the manipulation and mistreatment of the Founder began with the instigation of the infamous Father Narcisse Roussel, it was embraced and perpetuated by the other members of the General Council, Father Georges Caillet and Brother Dominique Clouzet.

Their campaign against the Founder endured relentlessly for nine years until Chaminade's death in 1850.

Father Chaminade's last years and dying days were a dark time for him. It is a painful irony, but even Caillet's mistreatment and cruelty toward the Founder—including seizing Chaminade's personal papers⁴⁶—in these years

⁴⁵ Marianist Resources Commission, Track I, Vol. 1, No. 8, Oct. 1970, 89. This document is the final chapter of Joseph Verrier's, "A Founder's Thought on the Apostolic Action of His Followers," unpublished manuscript. (*NB*: No primary source is cited for the quotation used from this MRC publication.)

⁴⁶ Vincent Vasey, SM, *Chaminade: Another Portrait* (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1987), 287. According to *Basic Handbook of Marianist Studies*, fourth ed. (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2016), 137, Caillet, in 1846, gradually cut off Chaminade's sending and receiving letters and restricted the Founder's access to

served as a witness to the enduring priority of the Sodality in Chaminade's vision. When Caillet eventually relented to some extent, he still would not return the document designating Chaminade as the director of the Marian Confraternities, i.e., what was left of the Sodality at that time.⁴⁷

Shortly after Caillet's election (October 1845) as Superior General, there was the announcement in the Madeleine, with no prior notice given to the Founder, and perhaps done even in his presence, that Father Caillet had taken over the direction of the Sodality.⁴⁸

Part Three

The Contemporary North American Parish as Context for the Actualization of Our Common Foundational Mission Today

I believe we are being called today to a cultivated disposition of Marianist *kenosis*, *kenosis* being the reference in Philippians to Jesus' self-emptying to take on our humanity.

Marianist *kenosis* would mean a particular emptying of ourselves and our charismatic mission into the local Church, an emptying that will help to animate new life into the local Church of our day and which will, at the same time, it may be hoped, rekindle that spark of vitality among us of which Fleming speaks.

For the sake of the Church in North America today, how might we engage our "perpetual mission" in this time and place?⁴⁹

members of the Society of Mary. Chaminade's papers were returned to him, minus the material on the "Director of Confraternities," by May 9, 1849. Chaminade died on January 22, 1850.

⁴⁷ Vasey, *Chaminade: Another Portrait*, 287.

⁴⁸ Vasey, *Chaminade: Another Portrait*, 263.

⁴⁹ Given the Chaminade-assigned role to the Institute of Mary to serve as "the person who never dies," the deeper responsibility here has to do with the extent to which the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary, as companion members of The Institute, are themselves in touch with our foundational mission and how well they focus on the Marianist mission today in their relationship with Marianist Lay Communities. We are just beginning to grapple with our shared call to "a common missionary vision."

Given the ecclesiastical and sociocultural pastoral emergency in which we find ourselves, I propose the signs of the times urge the Marianist Family to pursue *our common foundational mission* today in the common ministerial setting of the parish. Specifically, I suggest we do so to animate parish-based small church communities as central to a long-range vision for developing the North American parish as “a community of communities of faith in mission.”⁵⁰

These notions—“small faith communities,” “small Christian communities,” and “communities of faith in mission”—stand together well enough to be understood as cognate terms. However, intertwining our understanding of “the multiplication of the communities of faith in mission” in conjunction with a “parish” is something of a stumbling block for some in the Society of Mary. Our deeply developed identity as teachers and our long-standing investment in schools tend to blind the male professed to the perception of new possibilities.

Hesitations about the Society’s involvement in parish ministry are multiple, and each of these hesitations needs to be taken seriously. Each hesitation may be addressed but, in the interest of time, not here. I have addressed them at length in my paper *Mission and Charism*, posted on the NACMS website.

In the face of hesitations, let it be frankly acknowledged that it is not *the job* of the Marianist Family simply to be running parishes—any more than it is *the job* of Marianists simply to be running or sponsoring schools.

In response to the signs of the times, however, it is *our job* to be about the pursuit of our foundational *mission*—by operating in ministerial contexts that most favorably lend themselves directly to promoting the multiplication of communities of faith in mission.

I propose that the North American parish today presents itself to the Marianist Family in such a context.

This is not, first of all, simply about coming to the aid of a threatened, abstract institution. It is about people. As Pope John Paul II put it: “[T]he parish is not principally a structure, a territory, a building. The parish is, first of all, a

⁵⁰ For an extended social and ecclesial analysis of the relevant signs of the times, see the consensus draft proposal of a corporate vision for Marianist parish ministry developed in 2007-2008 by Marianist parish ministers under the auspices of the Office of Religious Life.

community of the faithful. . . . That is the task of the parish today: to be a community, to rediscover itself as community.”⁵¹

For better or worse, a parish is the ordinary experience of Church for most North Americans who are in any significant sense connected to Catholicism.

The contemporary pastoral emergency is keen. While a more substantial analysis of our situation is called for, a reference to statistics must suffice for now. Numbers can be a crude measuring stick when we are talking about the life of the Church, but they can also be instructive. Consider the massive fall off of participation in Sunday Eucharist during the past fifty years, along with the steady rise in the number of “nones.” These phenomena raise a blunt question: How many parishes will there be in North America at the beginning of the next century? The promotion of parish vitality needs and deserves our every attention.

However different our circumstances, we live in a time that resonates in many ways with Father Chaminade’s. Allowing for adaptation to our time and place, his insights about how to respond to the situation of the Church in crisis offer us guidance on how we might respond in a time of thorough-going secularization and rampant religious indifference.

With little cultural support for vibrant Christian life in general, much less for life with a Catholic sensibility, engaging the import of community for life and faith is pressing. Indeed, the recovery of community is a deep challenge in culture and for the Church in this culture. Conversion by contagion and ongoing mutual support in community are as relevant today as in nineteenth-century France.

For so many today, in-and-out Sunday Mass doesn’t really cut it as the kind of support needed for vital faith and Christian life. In a culture riven by crass individualism, steeped in consumerism, saturated with eroticism, and pulled this way and that by cynical intellectual relativism, Chaminade’s methodology of frequent, attractive, and not-just-religious gatherings can offer regular support and challenge fellow believers need today.

⁵¹ John Paul II, Address to Parish Focalarini, March 1986.

The small church community's vision⁵² for parish is an apt response to the circumstances of our time. This approach to the revitalization of the parish and the actualization of the Marianist mission is, I believe, a hand-in-glove fit.

Given the witness of our lives in communities of faith oriented to our foundational mission and charism, I believe our two religious congregations and Marianist Lay Communities are singularly equipped to promote this vision for the North American parish in our time.

The critical long-range partner in this effort would be Marianist Lay Communities. Our common foundational mission calls for the close missionary collaboration of the branches and points to the distinctive contribution the Marianist Family as a whole can offer to the contemporary North American Church.

It is not our *job*, however, simply to be about *generic* parish ministry. While Marianist parish ministry certainly entails a commitment to effective general parish ministry, it is, above all, a question of prioritizing mission over ministry.

Actualizing a parish-focused common missionary vision based on our common foundational mission invites the Family's engagement in a common ministerial setting.

Part Four

A Concrete Common Ministry Proposal

1. I imagine an intensely collaborative effort of the three branches in one or more dioceses where we are simultaneously invested in two mutually involved parishes in a given hospitable diocese,⁵³ one in a

⁵² The "small church community" designation is preferable to "small faith community" or even "small Christian community" for such groups, I suggest, for a couple of reasons. It underlines the fact that such groupings are not simply religious self-help groups. Their members are participants in something larger than themselves, the body of Christ. Further, as ecclesial groupings, they are called to be communities of missionary disciples.

⁵³ On the principle that a continental province deserves a cultivated continental presence, it may be suggested here that an institutionally grounded major Marianist initiative is needed on the East Coast of the United States. Given the decades-long drain

suburban setting, the other in an urban setting, where both the Marianist Family and the parishes we serve are intentionally, collaboratively, and perseveringly focused on the development of the parish as “a community of communities,” communities of missionary disciples. These parishes would pursue the development of small church communities, not simply as a program, but as basic units of a parish in a long-range plan for cultivating the life and mission of the parish.⁵⁴

2. In time, I imagine that x number of these parish-rooted small communities would come to double as Marianist Lay Communities, likewise invested in our shared Marianist mission for the sake of the Church and society.
3. Understanding these Marianist involvements in a parish, first of all, as mission-driven and not ministry-driven investments, I imagine a specifically projected time-limited commitment of the two congregations, a commitment of x number of years, to a given set of parishes. The specificity of a limited timeframe is meant to concentrate attention above all on the realization of the mission: the implantation of small church communities in the parish with x number of them coming to double as Marianist Lay Communities.
4. Anticipating that our congregations would be moving on in time to serve in another set of parishes, these parish-grounded now Marianist mission-driven MLCs, remaining in full communion with succeeding pastoral leadership, would continue to serve the ongoing development of the parishes in question as “communities of communities of faith in mission.”

of East Coast Marianists for service in other parts of the United States, reciprocity from the rest of the province is long overdue.

⁵⁴ For discussion of what is involved in the development of parish-based small Christian communities, see the consensus draft proposal of a corporate vision for Marianist parish ministry developed in 2007-2008 by Marianist parish ministers under the auspices of the Office of Religious Life.

The goal, it should be emphasized, is not to produce Marianist parishes. There can be no such thing. While there may be such a thing as a Marianist school, in the sense that we own, shape, and staff it, the parish belongs, first of all, to itself and to the larger local Church of which it is a part. Marianist parish ministers serve that church.

The role of this presentation has been to approach the articulation of a common missionary vision grounded on our common foundational mission, along with basic elements of a common ministry proposal, to enable the actualization of this vision. A range of questions remain, and issues must be dealt with on the road to the implementation of this proposal. It is a proposal that needs to be tested, I acknowledge, but it is worthy of serious consideration.

As for the implications for MLC-NA today, this proposal is in no way intended to disrupt what is already in place. Rather, it envisions a distinct, additional approach to the development of MLCs. This proposal builds on Lay Marianists' primary ecclesial groundedness as parishioners and on the particular consciousness of MLCs as ecclesial bodies rooted in a local place.

Chaminade was not about establishing *Marianist* Lay Communities. He was about developing grounded lay ecclesial communities animated by the spirit of Mary. His sodalists did not initially come from parishes, but they were grounded in the city and the Church in Bordeaux. As time went on, they related to their parishes as well. To be in the local Church today does call, first of all, for being rooted in the parish. Chaminade himself, it should be remembered, spoke of Sodality communities as "seedbeds for parishes." "The best sodalist," he declared, "will then be the best parishioner." Having said this, the MLC name continues to be altogether appropriate, even as we acknowledge that MLCs are to be understood as grounded *ecclesial* lay communities animated by the spirit of Mary and joined in alliance with her mission.

While I am not fully informed about the situation of all Marianist Lay Communities in North America today, I have the impression that, while there are some concentrations of them in local places, it is also the case that many exist singly here and there throughout North America. The ultimate missionary effectiveness of MLCs, however, seems to me to be tied to generating them as ecclesially grounded, concentrated multiples. They are meant to be a critical

mass in specific locations. This approach was Chaminade's *modus operandi* in Bordeaux.

We may take some guidance here from the situation of the Madeleine Sodality. Its extended fruitfulness stemmed significantly from its having become a mass movement, which was Chaminade's explicit intention. This is the fruit of his call for "perpetual mission."

The Madeleine Sodality's ability to emerge as a mass movement was partly conditioned by its location in a sufficiently populous geographic area, grounded in a local Church (i.e., diocese), and rooted in a specific ecclesiastical institution. It was located in the city of Bordeaux, grounded in the Archdiocese of Bordeaux, and situated in the Madeleine Chapel. There is guidance here for maximizing the generation of MLCs as a contemporary mass movement in a local place. This common ministry proposal offers a pathway in that direction.

Speaking as we do so volubly of "community" calls for us to pause for a moment to remind ourselves of the depths it really entails. We are not speaking simply of a sociological phenomenon. The community of which we speak is the visible expression of invisible communion, a conscious and intentional acknowledgment of our participation in the communion that is our God. We live, move, and have our being embedded in this Trinitarian mystery that pours itself out on our behalf in Creation, Redemption, and Inspiration. Our God is a mystery of communion and mission—mission, we know in faith, leads to final communion.

We live eschatologically oriented yet historically grounded. God's reign is at work among us, but we have a role to play on the way to the fullness of God's reign.

We pursue our Marianist mission animated by our alliance with Mary in her mission. This is the foundation for our Marian spirituality. A Marian spirituality that sustains our participation in that mission is essentially ecclesial. An ecclesial spirituality is, first of all, a baptismal/eucharistic spirituality, a spirituality rooted in word and sacrament that is celebrated, first of all, as parish, the ordinary and most local experience of the Church.

As Christians living from a eucharistic spirituality, we are called to become what we eat: good bread for the world. It is in the flow of communion

into solidarity that the community of missionary disciples finds itself propelled to the work of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.

It is in this flow of communion into solidarity that we may find the convergence of this common missionary proposal with that advanced by Raymond Fitz in his 2017 presentation to MLC-NA. I only wish we had the time to explore that correlation here. Let it at least be said that a basic element to today's proposal—the Marianist Family's collaborative and simultaneous investment in two mutually involved parishes (suburban and urban)—provides a concrete platform for realizing the vision of an "ecclesiology of the regional Church" as envisioned by the 2017 Fitz proposal.

If the current proposal may be described as focused on the parish and "communion," the Fitz proposal may be characterized as leading from "solidarity" and is focused on the world. It is at the parish, I believe, where our proposals converge. It is at the parish that communion is meant to flow into solidarity and where, for a people of faith, that solidarity finds the communion which sources it.

This proposal, suggesting the parish as "a community of communities," in league with other such parishes, offers a basis for regional ecclesiology to be realized concretely and locally. In tune with our Marianist charism and foundational Marianist mission, and moved forward in a spirit of *kenosis*, the Marianist Family is poised to make a substantial new contribution to Church and society in our time.

MLCs can serve as the fulcrum in the contemporary parish on the way to re-position the North American Church. Becoming, on a macro level, a community of communities of faith in mission, the big Church may labor ever more fruitfully at the transformation of hearts and the transformation of structures and systems so God may be all, in all, and in a transformed world.

The warrant for the endurance of the whole Marianist Family, I believe, is not for the sake of sponsoring a school or staffing a parish. Instead, it is grounded in the Family's full retrieval, embrace, and pursuit of our common Marianist charism, motivated by the foundational Marianist mission, in contexts most favorable to directly enabling its actualization.